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EMANUELE CAMINADA

Universität zu Köln

[emanuele.caminada@gmail.com](mailto:emanuele.caminada@gmail.com)

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# THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF COLLECTIVE POSITIONALITY

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## *abstract*

*Searle is convinced that phenomenology is inadequate to face social-ontological problems. Despite his opinion, collective intentionality in its positional effort can be explained through phenomenological reductions. Clarifying how Husserl comes to the evidence of the background within the exercise of the transcendental reduction, it has to be shown how the frame of primordial reduction could make an inner description of the plural first-person perspective possible. Finally, some of the reasons that left Husserl to be completely overlooked in the contemporary debate on collective intentionality are exposed. The suspicion that is aroused by Husserl's transcendental phenomenology could be dispelled if one only considers the social-ontological value of the structure of collective positionality that Husserl claims to be the condition of possibility for the experience of objectivity.*

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## *keywords*

*Collective intentionality, positionality, phenomenological methods, idealism/realism problem*

If phenomenology is the study of consciousness as experienced from a first-person perspective, the structure of collective intentionality should belong to the main themes of phenomenological research. Indeed, in Husserl's reflections we find several attempts to sketch a methodology in order to thematize the *plural* first-person perspective in contrast to the *singular* one, as it is provisionally given in the solipsistic account (Hua IV). These attempts are primarily carried out in order to clarify both the intersubjective background against and the common ground upon which objectivity is experienced. Given this transcendental aim, the descriptive value of Husserl's phenomenological research on the plural first-person perspective was overlooked, if not misunderstood, as an idealistic foundational enterprise. I will not face here the problems of Husserl's own social ontology, i.e. the problems concerning the constitution of the human world through collective attitudes or of the foundation of common mind and higher order personalities by collective intentionality (Hua IV, Hua VI, Hua XIV, Caminada 2011). I will rather show how collective intentionality in its *positional* effort can be revealed through two forms of phenomenological reductions Husserl worked out: 1. *transcendental reduction* (Hua III/1); 2. *primordial reduction* (Hua I) interpreted as a form of reduction to the we (Hua XV). Both reductions were designed to find a descriptive clue to solve the big philosophical problem that obsessed Husserl throughout his life: How can subjective minds posit objectivity?

In the last part of this contribution I will uncover some of the reasons that led to the fact that Husserl has been completely overlooked in the contemporary debate on collective intentionality.

1. One of the tasks of the transcendental reduction is to enable us to follow the evidence of the *positional* background through which we take for granted the evidence of the *real* world. Following the inner structure of simple experience, one can see how intentionality is always embedded in a more complex whole. We experience much more than what we *presently* intend: given a perspective or a fragment of something, we experience it as *real*. When we say 1. "P is there", we don't intend only the side we actually see, but the totality of the object. In further experience one can change idea and state: 2. "P is not real, it was only a shape, I confused myself!". Switching from 1 to 2 presupposes that the intentional structure of the experience

upon which the subject is judging changed and forced the subject to switch its position toward the object. P is not anymore seen as real. When we take something as real or apparent, possible or dubious we are *taking a position* toward what we presently experience. We are posing this perceived element as real or apparent, as possible or dubious. The characteristic to be real or apparent, possible or dubious is not given instantaneously. It exceeds the actual moment of intentionality. Husserl calls this surplus *positionality*. The task of transcendental reduction is to neutralize all positions concerning the existence of the intentional contents. Bracketing what we usual take for granted we realize by contrast that in every actual experience we posit more than we actually perceive. Furthermore we discover that positionality is a continuous *effort* that we usually don't mind, such as a background noise or our breath. But where does this surplus of meaning that positionality attributes to what we actually perceive come from? What kind of reasons do we have to accord or not to accord reality to something we perceive? According to Husserl, every intentional act arises not only on the basis of an intentional *horizon* but also against a *background* of experience which produces intentional habits and offers the frames through which every new experience of the same type can be anticipated. The mind has no atomic structure: Every intentional experience implies a focus and a situated network of potential links that frame it. Thanks to this implicit holistic frame the intentional content is meaningfully enriched. It is only according to the implicit situation that one is inclined, for example, to posit a shape not as a real person but as a mannequin if one is entering a clothes store. The increasing knot of meanings related to an intentional content develops into a framework through which every type of this token will be experienced. This meaningful framework is the intentional *schema* that configures every new encounter with similar objects or situations (Lohmar 2008, 103). Husserl calls this schema *type* and the process of its development *typification*. He defines types as a form of *habitus*, because, as any other habitual structure, types present an *enactive* moment, i.e. a punctual act that originates this structure, that is kept further in force and can be reenacted through endorsement or expire once it is given up. Mental life is therefore characterized as a never-ending dynamic of typification, i.e. sedimentation of experienced intentional networks in habitual structures that can be aroused in the encounter with similar objects. Every experience with its positional structures *sediments* itself and becomes stable "ground" for further experiences, motivating fantasies, actions, or expectations that drive further perceptions, etc. Husserl describes the web of potential and habitual positionality that

surrounds every intended content as the background against which the subject experiences it. This background is therefore not a hypothesis about some non-intentional functions, it is an intentional structure articulated according to an intentional modality (*habitus*) that we can directly experience.

So far I exposed how Husserl describes the way in which what we have access to in perception receives its positional character against the background of our concrete experience. The second step is to show how *our own* experience is not *owned* in the sense of a *private* one. It is *ours* in a stronger sense, but in the meantime *own*.

2.  
Plural  
Intentionality as  
Revealed Through  
the Primordial  
Reduction

Husserl claims that through the encounter with other embodied minds one's own background is radically modified. This radical modification becomes evident through the method of *primordial reduction*. In the background of a concrete subjectivity, there are not only the structures that he or she acquired in his or her experience, but also all the intentional structures that are related to other subjects, or, as Husserl would say, that are *implicated* by other subjects. This is very important in order to understand the result of the phenomenological reductions (which usually are operated by a socialized adult): "Phenomenological reduction does not lead me back to my private inner life and its positional effort. Wherever I met other subjectivities, this or that subject, or a plurality of other egos, the phenomenological reduction leads me back to a plural subjectivity that embraces my subjectivity and all these counterparts with their life, with all their phenomena and intentional correlation" (Hua XXXV, 111). Phenomenology, the study of consciousness from a first-person perspective, is not solipsistically imprisoned in individual life: among the first-person perspectives that one can phenomenologically study, belongs also the *plural* one. The phenomenological reduction can be led not only by the structure of *ego cogito* of the one who is meditating on one's intentional effort, but also by the structure of *nos cogitamus* (Hua VIII, 316). The task to reach "a transcendental sociological phenomenology" (Hua IX, 539) lies in the aimed developments of Husserl's philosophy.

Husserl speaks therefore about a *We-mode* of intentionality and tries also to develop a pertaining method of description in order to understand the nature of the intentional background against which we experience objectivity. If in the background we can explicate the horizon of the whole world, *whose* background is that? How can my individual intentional life be embedded into this intersubjective network? Where does the horizon of my background, my intentional network, come from?

One attempt to answer these questions is shaped in Husserl's own interpretation of the primordial reduction (Hua I) as a "peculiar reduction to the We" (Hua XV, 66). This reduction can be *static* or *genetic*. It is static if we describe the *structure* of socialized experience. It is genetic if we describe the *process* of socialization. According to Husserl, these are possible questions of a *static* analysis of We-intentionality: "How do we experience the world, this world that we experience together and we have experienced in our world life always together? How can we describe this world ontologically? How do we experience its modality? How can every community experience its particular communal world with its cultural predicates? The formal structure of the *genetic* process of socialisation can be thematized through *primordial reduction*: given our life-world we can try to reduce my life only to my private *cogitationes*, where I experience the world as it is given only for me. I reduce myself to my primordial ego and then I ask how it became social, how could a communal world and a community be experienced [...]" (ibid.).

This methodology is a particular form of deconstructive reduction (*Abbau-Reduktion*): the aim is to try to neutralize our positional acts and efforts that depend and rely on other subjects. I quote Husserl's words: "we disregard all constitutional effects of intentionality relating non-mediatly or mediatly to other subjectivity and delimit first of all the total nexus of that actual and potential intentionality in which the ego constitutes within himself a peculiar oneness" (Hua I, §44). Through this selective disregard of some positional acts we are performing a very peculiar abstraction within the background. It is a very new sense of abstraction. We live naturally as differentiated and contrasted from others – me and you; that's me: I can abstract myself; I remain *alone*. But the primordial reduction is not a kind of transcendental Robinson Crusoe. As Husserl stresses, we are not thinking about the last man after a pest. On the contrary we are revealing an essential structure of intentionality, a core of oneness in subjective intentional life. But this core of oneness is very poor. It is our bodily experience, an experience that knows no objectivity, because everything experienced is only linked to my own experience. Husserl puts out that the experience of objectivity belongs to a higher level than that of primordial experience. Disregarding all positionality that is embedded into the experience with other subjects, one could somehow experience a coherent reality, but nothing like objectivity. Husserl claims that his philosophy is a form of intersubjective transcendental philosophy because the positional efforts that enable us to take the objective reality of the world for granted are interwoven in intersubjective, social intentional life.

Without social cognition, we could say, there is no cognition of objectivity. We can experience an objective world because we are a *We*, because we are socialized. We can also idealize our social experience in the form of “everyone would agree that [...]” and therefore sediment in our background the sights of our community and of the rational collectivity we aim to belong to.

### 3. Clearing Some Misunderstandings Concerning Husserl's Phenomenology

If Husserl tried to develop the methodologies of phenomenological reductions in order to describe the inner nature of collective intentionality in its positional effort, why has this task been completely overlooked in the contemporary debate on collective intentionality? Now I would like to offer some historical and theoretical reasons for this fact.

The main reason lies in the misunderstandings of Husserl's controversial way of calling himself a “transcendental idealist”. His aim was to give a “philosophical” name to his attempt to justify that naturalistic objectivity is to be explained through a rich eidetic description of subjective life. This was in his mind *the* philosophical task of our time. Similarly, Searle sees the challenge that philosophy has nowadays to face in the conciliation of natural sciences with the subjective character of personal life (Searle 2010). The architecture of Searle's social ontology provides in his eyes for the peculiar objectivity of social reality, since the latter cannot exhibit the naturalistic sources of scientific evidence. In fact, for both Husserl and Searle, questions of social ontology are embedded in their philosophical projects and linked to the task of looking for the peculiar objectivity of everyday social life. Despite that, Searle is firmly convinced that phenomenology is inadequate to face the problems of contemporary social ontology and especially to describe the inner structure of collective intentionality. I claim that this belief is rooted more in the misleading criticism of Searle's colleague and rival in Berkeley, the Heideggerian philosopher Hubert Dreyfus, than in phenomenology itself (Searle 1999, 2000, Dreyfus 1993, 2000, 2002). The paradigmatic problem of social ontology, i.e. how can mind-dependent structures be understood to be real and objective, was not ignored by Husserl: as a matter of facts, it was the problem he faced throughout his whole life!

If phenomenology has been rediscovered in the last years as an interesting travel mate for analytic social ontology (De Monticelli 2011), Husserl was not. An important note: speaking about phenomenology in singular is misleading, since we can distinguish at least three main streams only within German phenomenology and many other rills in further European traditions, such as the French or the Italian ones. The three main streams of

German Phenomenology are: 1. the “orthodox” Husserlian, transcendental one; 2. the realistic and personalistic approach of the early circles of Munich and Göttingen; 3. the existential shift driven by Heidegger.

Social ontology up to now only encountered the last two forms of phenomenology. Social-ontological questions have been nowadays recognized as embedded into the tradition of early, realistic phenomenology (Salice 2011), since through the pioneering work of the “Seminar for Austro-German Philosophy” an important bridge was built in the 80s between the revaluation of Reinach’s account of social acts and Searle’s speech acts theory (Mulligan 1987). We have to thank Schmid (2005) for having revealed a non-individualistic account of Heidegger’s *Dasein*, and working out a new positive phenomenological understanding of We-intentionality. His personal research is rooted both in the realistic and existential tradition of phenomenology, as well as in contemporary analytical philosophy. Husserl himself never took part in the social-ontological reassessment of phenomenology. Why is that? Both Mulligan and Schmid believe that Husserl became harnessed in a “monological” account of intentionality that led him to his shift towards Kant’s idealism. Searle should have claimed that with his own turn to idealism, Husserl tragically helped his project of a descriptive and scientific philosophy to vanish (as cited in Mulligan 2003). Because of these biases, Husserlian phenomenology up to now has not been taken in consideration as a social-ontological challenge.

This image of Husserl is not anymore maintainable. The elephantine publication of the Husserliana volumes and the actual Husserlian research have confuted most of this criticism. Therefore, we need to rehabilitate Husserl, not only as a subject of history of philosophy, but also as a good philosophical partner for contemporary debates. Husserlian studies themselves could profit from the contemporary debate in social ontology, since it facilitates the systematisation of Husserl’s attempts in order to describe the plural first-person perspective (e.g. distinguishing between *common intentionality* as the concrete intentionality of a group’s mind and *open intersubjectivity* as the universalizing idealisation of the former as the implicated *telos* of the pretension of objectivity).

Searle further believes that phenomenology can neither explain how intentionality refers to its conditions of satisfaction, nor how it is linked to the background. Both claims are unjustified. Husserl worked out the problem of the rationality of intentionality (its different styles of evidence in reference to intuitive conditions of satisfaction) and of the background, beginning with his *Ideas* (Hua III/1). I am not at all claiming that Husserl already said what Searle discovered. Their concepts of intentionality

are very far apart from each other, despite the caricatured polemic of Dreidegger (*nome de guerre* of Dreyfus, combination of himself and Heidegger) against Hussearle (*chimera* of Husserl and Searle), where Dreyfus thinks to make Searle the victim of the same confutations he believes Heidegger could make with Husserl (Beyer 1997, Dreyfus 2002). That is fair neither to Husserl nor to Searle!

There are actually at least two relevant statements about the nature of intentionality that Searle *does not* share with Husserl: 1. Husserl describes *non-propositional* forms of intentionality (both conceptual and non-conceptual); 2. Husserl *does not* explain intentionality via causality, rather causality via intentionality. Nevertheless Searle shares with Husserl the ideals of truth, rationality, and objectivity, since they aim into the same direction to reform philosophy as a descriptive and scientific discipline. Furthermore, Husserl also shares with Mulligan and Searle the belief that realism is part of the taken-for-granted background of our practices. Realism to Husserl is a natural and sane everyday attitude, but he does not take it philosophically for granted. He picks up the modern transcendental question (*Why* do we take the real world for granted?) and tries to answer it phenomenologically, i.e. within a methodological description (*How* do we take the real world for granted?). Because of the answers he gives, he tried to define his philosophy as a peculiar form of transcendental idealism. The huge peculiarity of his idealism is that it is not a form of subjective idealism, but rather an intersubjective one (Zahavi 2001), since it involves the peculiar social-ontological idealisation that leads to the ideal of an *open intersubjectivity*.

Strange as it may sound, Husserl would agree with Searle's arguments against subjective idealism. Given one of the arguments for idealism, Searle refutes: "1. All we have access to in perception are the contents of *our own* experiences. 2. The only epistemic basis we can have for claims about the external world are our perceptual experiences. Therefore, 3. *The only reality we can meaningfully speak of is the reality of perceptual experiences*" (Searle 1995, 172). Husserl would not even accept the first point, because he claims that what we have access to in our perception is not only the content of a *private* experience but can rather be coordinated and sedimented in the background as a *collective* and *common* one. Therefore, I claim that the foundation of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy relies on his understanding of collective intentionality as the way through which the positional processes of constitution sediment in the intentional background through socialization (*Vergemeinschaftung*). My aim was not to argue for the validity of this foundation, but to show that because of this goal, Husserl



tried to describe the intentional structure of collective intentionality within the methodological frame of the two peculiar phenomenological reductions discussed above: 1. *Transcendental Reduction* (Hua III/1); 2. *Primordial Reduction* (Hua I) as a form of reduction to the *We* (Hua XV).

Returning to Searle's premise in the rejected argument for subjective idealism ("All we have access to in perception are the contents of our own experiences"), we can attest that there is a peculiar method to try to experience according to this premise, relying only on the experiences that arise in the sphere of ownness. Husserl tried to show what would be given in such a case. We can be sceptic about the method of primordial reduction, but it is clear that he didn't claim that the constitution of the natural world is a private, monological problem, since within the sphere of ownness there is no background based on which we could take for granted the objective world, as we always do. In order to intend the world as real and objective, our experience structurally depends on collective positionality.

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